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NATURE LANGUAGE IN ISAIAH 1–39 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR
ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: INTERACTING WITH HILARY
MARLOW'S *BIBLICAL PROPHETS AND CONTEMPORARY
ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS*

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The relationship between human beings and the natural world is one of the weightiest matters facing contemporary politics, ethics, and religion. Recent studies purporting global climate change—with all of its supposed anthropogenic effects—have prompted a popular debate that is often won on account of volume, not veracity. However, *ad hominem* attacks do not move the discussion forward for either side. In order for Christians to speak into the public arena intelligibly and truthfully, a biblical position on such environmental concerns must be established. Developing a biblical position demands careful study of biblical texts, and Hilary Marlow, Lecturer in Hebrew and Old Testament at the University of Cambridge and Associate of the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, has sought to provide such research in her recent work *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics*. In this volume, Marlow focuses specifically upon three eighth-century prophets and their perspective on the natural world. The following passage identifies both the direction and methodology of her research:

[W]hat insights might a close study of the biblical texts yield, and is there a viable ecological hermeneutic to be derived from such readings? What principles derived from the text might inform discussions in environmental ethics, and conversely, how might the issues faced today influence reading of the texts? The aim of this book is to use the tools of biblical studies to provide an in-depth exegesis of part of

the Old Testament, namely some of the prophetic books, to answer such questions.¹

In the earlier part of the book, Marlow offers a historical survey of the relationship between Christianity and the environment, arguing that the Christian worldview throughout much of church history helped produce “the industrial and technological materialism of today with its negative environmental impacts.”² Marlow concludes the study by asserting that her reading of the text demonstrates that such a utilitarian anthropocentric view of the natural world cannot be derived from Amos, Hosea, or Isaiah 1–39. The biblical data, according to Marlow, present a worldview that sees humanity as closely interrelated with God, the natural world, and other human beings. Therefore, any appropriate and environmentally ethical reading of the text must take into account this triangular pattern of relationships among God, humanity, and non-human creation (i.e., “nature”). Marlow’s conclusions rely greatly upon her study of Isaiah 1–39. The intent of this article is to examine and evaluate the validity of Marlow’s position, focusing specifically on her exegetical methodology and her treatment of nature language and imagery in Isaiah 1–39, along with its implications for environmental ethics.

Marlow prepares the way for her discussion of the biblical text by evaluating the exegetical methods developed in recent studies associated with ecological hermeneutics. She focuses upon the work of Norman Habel, founder of the Earth Bible Project (EBP)—a group devoted to ecologically sensitive readings of the Bible. Habel’s ecological hermeneutic resembles liberation and feminist readings in that “For Habel, the assumption that the text, as well as most of its interpreters, is anthropocentric legitimizes adopting a hermeneutic of suspicion,” which reads the text standing on the side of the oppressed, in this case nature.³ In response, Marlow offers five substantial critiques of the EBP: (1) the systematic hermeneutical method adopted by the EBP (a reader-response approach) is too restrictive and does

1. Marlow, *Biblical Prophets*, 5–6.

2. *Ibid.*, 81.

3. *Ibid.*, 87.

not allow the text to speak for itself, (2) the touted connections between ecological and feminist readings are superficial and not legitimate, (3) the terminology espoused by the group is imprecise and careless, (4) the eco-justice principles for interpretation set forth are more ideological than methodological, and (5) these same principles are secular in nature and are inappropriate for dealing with religious texts like the Bible. Marlow then seeks to develop and demonstrate an alternative approach to reading the Bible that is less anachronistic but no less relevant to contemporary environmental ethics.

She proposes the following “ecological triangle” as an alternative hermeneutic: God, Non-human creation, and Humanity. Approaching the Bible with this triangular paradigm, Marlow seeks to ask three questions of the text: (1) what understanding does the text present of non-human creation (local or cosmic)? (2) What are the assumptions of the author about Yahweh’s relationship to the created world? And, (3) what effects do human actions have upon non-human creation and vice versa? Marlow stresses that such a methodology serves only as a background to her exegesis and is not a “formal grid” through which she interprets the text.

In her chapter “The Vineyard of the Lord of Hosts: YHWH, the People and the Land in Isaiah 1–39,” Marlow employs her above methodology in exegetically studying passages referring to the natural world in Isaiah 1–39. She first addresses nature language in the context of cosmic imagery in Isa 14:12–15; 13:9–13; 34:2–5; and 24:1–13. Marlow’s discussion of the first three texts is brief and consists mainly of a commentary that highlights the cause and effect relationship between the sin of human beings and its consequent cosmic effects to be rendered on the Day of Judgment. She writes: “YHWH clearly executes judgment on human behavior (13:9, 11; 34:2–3), and the effect in the heavens is portrayed as a reflection of this (13:10; 34:4). The heavens are not punished by YHWH for the sins of the people, but his anger disrupts the whole world order.”⁴

4. Ibid., 199.

Marlow's treatment of Isaiah 24 is more substantial. She argues that this chapter represents a later redaction, and consequently, illustrates how "a message originally directed at the people of Israel is reconstructed to encompass the whole world and a powerful Israelite concept concerning the well-being of the land is universalized."⁵ The principle of the text remains the same, according to Marlow, regardless of whether the text was written to address a local famine, a national disaster, or eschatological realities. Recognizing the thematic connections with Deuteronomy 28, Marlow asserts that the Isaiah text follows the basic framework of blessings and curses observed in the Pentateuch. Her emphasis is again fixed upon the cause and effect relationship exhibited by Israel's covenant disobedience and the languishing of the land that ensued.

Marlow redirects her study from cosmic language in Isaiah to the more common occurrence of nature language reflecting local flora and fauna. She first examines Isa 1:2–3 and 28:23–29, arguing that both texts are examples of the prophet appealing to the natural order in a way that makes nature Israel's exemplar. She posits that Isa 1:3, which compares Israel's disobedience to the obedience of an ox and a donkey, is a moral comparison. The contrast is "not between supposedly intelligent human beings and senseless beasts, but rather between those of God's creatures who act according to their God-given instincts and those who deliberately shun the divinely instituted moral order."⁶ Similarly, the passage in Isaiah 28, according to Marlow, compares the wisdom of Yahweh in both agriculture and international relations. Verses 14–22 call Israel to trust in the Lord instead of Assyria, and verses 23–29 serve as an illustration of Yahweh's faithfulness to his people by giving good practices for farming. Marlow believes the passage to be a parable instructing Israelites to live in the world in harmony with their Creator and his established principles for interacting with the natural world.

Isaiah 1–39 includes more references to vines and viticulture than any other prophetic literature in the Old Testament, and

5. *Ibid.*, 201.

6. *Ibid.*, 209.

Marlow believes this to be significant to the writer's understanding of the natural world. Vine imagery in Isaiah is largely metonymic in that "Just as fruitful vines epitomize the blessings of YHWH, so too the presence of thorns and briars denotes removal of those blessings."⁷ Devoting several pages to Isa 5:1–7 and 27:2–6, Marlow discusses the theological significance of the vine in Israel's self-perception as Yahweh's people and the prophet's depiction of Israel's future hope and judgment.

Continuing her study, Marlow examines Isaiah 34 and 35 and the relationship between humanity and animal populations communicated therein. These chapters present an antithetical picture of judgment and salvation with opposite effects reflected in the surrounding natural environments. Chapter 34 describes the desolation of Edom at the judgment of the Lord. Marlow comments on the de-creation motif created by the use of *תֹהוּ* (*tohu*, "formless") and *בֹהוּ* (*bohu*, "empty"), two parallel terms used in Gen 1:2 to describe pre-creation existence. She also notes that the scenario presented in Isaiah 34 is described by events not unfamiliar to modern ecology, such as: burning of the land and degradation of the soil (v. 9), desertification and depopulation (v. 10), encroachment of vegetation (v.13), species colonization (vv. 13, 14), and permanent habitat change (vv. 16, 17). The wild animal's permanent residence in the city is significant to Marlow. She writes: "It is only for the human population, not the animal one, that the outcome is disastrous."⁸ The resulting picture of judgment does not portray the "wilderness" as inherently negative, or threatening to humanity, only out of place with respect to the divine order established in creation. The chapter refers to several different animals that are involved in the takeover of Edom. However, Marlow acknowledges that it is nearly impossible to determine with certainty which "wild" animals the text is referring to, due to the ambiguity of the Hebrew.

Isaiah 35, with its vision of restoration and regrowth, stands in stark contrast to chapter 34. The desert will be transformed by

7. *Ibid.*, 209.

8. *Ibid.*, 229.

life-giving water and the human population will receive divine healing at the coming of the glory of the Lord (v. 2). Similar realities are portrayed in Isa 11:1–10 as the “shoot of Jesse” reigns in righteousness and justice. In this passage the whole created order appears to be reversed, according to Marlow. The harmony created between wild and domestic animals, as well as with human beings, forms a new paradigm for the created world that transcends observable laws of nature. Marlow comments, “This depiction of perfection is not intended to negate the natural biological processes of the world, but rather to paint a wide picture of the potentiality of YHWH’s ideal reign.”⁹ This picture of the ideal reign uses poetic and hyperbolic nature language in order to depict the radical change Yahweh will initiate in all creation.

Marlow develops her work by reflecting on her exegetical study and seeking to bridge the gap between the context of the ancient world and contemporary environmental concerns. She puts forward three “seminal ideas” that she believes help facilitate the dialogue between the two horizons of the Bible and the modern reader: (1) the value of non-human creation, (2) the ethics of human behavior, and (3) individual and community approaches. In describing the prophets’ perceived value of non-human creation, she stresses her conclusion about the interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world. She writes: “The knowledge that human behaviour impacts other parts of creation, and vice versa, and the presupposition that this is part of the moral order of the universe form a fundamental part of the prophetic message.”¹⁰ Marlow argues that Isaiah’s appeal to the natural world (e.g., Isa 1:2–3) and his portrayal of the earth as “mourning” (Isa 24:4), demonstrate a prophetic worldview that perceived non-human creation as having a separate identity and an inherent positive value. Marlow concedes that, at first glance, Isaiah appears to maintain a highly anthropocentric understanding of the natural world, but she argues that this is not a utilitarian anthropocentrism bent toward exploitation. She

9. *Ibid.*, 241–42.

10. *Ibid.*, 263.

develops her case as follows: (1) the sheer number of references to wild species in Isaiah suggests that observation of wildlife outside the city was part of daily life, (2) the idea of the “wilderness,” or “wild,” is ambiguous and cannot simply be interpreted to mean “hostile,” and (3) Isa 34:14–17 describes the divine initiative to provide long-term rest and fecundity for wild animals, demonstrating that, at least in this case, human needs are not of primary concern.

Concluding her study, Marlow correlates her tripartite hermeneutic with her three ideas for bridging the culture gap. The result is a “new model” for reading texts that is anthropocentric (i.e., it begins with the interpreter’s perceptions) and takes into account humanity’s relationships to God, the natural world, and other human beings. Marlow summarizes her approach stating: “The model draws upon the principle of interconnectivity—which itself forms the basis both for science of ecology and for the worldview of the prophetic texts studied.”¹¹ Interconnectivity between humanity and non-human creation is the central component of Marlow’s study and proves to be the most demonstrable conclusion from her exegetical study.

Marlow’s research is to be highly commended in at least two primary ways. First, her treatment and critiques of the EBP are fair and insightful. Her willingness to question the assumptions and hermeneutical presuppositions of people on her side of the global-warming debate reflects an interest in the biblical text over against environmental party lines. In fact, Marlow’s work has potential to offend readers on either side of the debate, leaving her in an unpopular medial position. Her academic courage is laudable, and her commitment to productively move the discussion forward among Christians is greatly appreciated.

Marlow’s conclusion that humanity is interconnected with non-human creation is biblically viable and well argued; indeed, it is perhaps the greatest contribution of the work. It is difficult to imagine an environmental position that would disagree with such a fundamental claim; however, Marlow’s work presents a

11. *Ibid.*, 275.

compelling case that Isaiah perceived the future of humanity and the future of the natural world as interconnected.

Marlow's exegesis of the Hebrew text in Isaiah is well done. She interacts with the text at a scholarly level often addressing significant matters such as compositional history, variant readings, and theological significance. Her interactions with other major commentators and authors, along with her attention to detail in exegesis, reveal her desire to engage the topic in a scholarly manner trying to allow the text to speak for itself.

Unfortunately, however, the present work also has several weaknesses that hinder the overall persuasiveness of the study. First, Marlow's foundational idea of interconnectivity between humanity and the natural world does not speak against utilitarian anthropocentrism in Isaiah, a position she argues is unbiblical. Marlow posits the ideas of interconnectivity and utilitarianism as if they are two mutually exclusive ways of viewing humanity's relationship with nature, but they simply are not. Proving the existence of interconnectivity, which Marlow does well, does not determine the grounds for the relationship—it only proves that one exists. It is quite possible to hold a utilitarian view toward the natural world, while believing there is a close interconnection between human beings and non-human creation. Marlow's negative understanding of utilitarianism appears to stem from her view that utilitarianism is synonymous with exploitation. Unfortunately, such loaded semantic associations could stifle Marlow's dialogue with Christians who believe that humanity can appropriately "use" the natural world but do not support the exploitation of it. It is ironic that Marlow criticizes the EBP for their carelessness and imprecision in language. Marlow's study, along with her conclusions, would have been greatly aided by a formal presentation of what she means by "utilitarian," especially since she is trying to argue for an anthropocentrism that is expressly not utilitarian.

Second, the cause and effect relationship highlighted in Isaiah strongly supports an anthropocentric view of nature that does not appear to place humanity and non-human creation on equal ground. In all of the examples provided of cause and effect in Isaiah 1–39, humanity and God are the cause while the natural

world is the arena in which the effects are displayed. Such a one-sided cause and effect relationship points toward anthropocentrism or theocentrism in Isaiah's understanding of the natural world. In the quotation mentioned above, Marlow writes that a key part of Isaiah's message was "the knowledge that human behavior impacts other parts of creation, and vice versa."¹² However, the "vice versa" is not at all explicit in the text. Marlow provides no example (nor do I know of one) where the natural world is the cause and the effects are played out in humanity. Instead, the non-human creation passively reflects either the sinfulness of humanity or the glory of God depending upon the particular text and its redemptive-historical context. Within Isaiah 1–39, the espoused cause and effect relationship between humanity and non-human creation is not reciprocal. This is not to deny the reality that occurrences in the world, such as floods or famines, affect humanity, only that such a cause and effect relationship does not appear to be the concern of Isaiah.

Another weakness of Marlow's study is her belief that the concept of wilderness is not always a negative one in Isaiah. This position is superficial and not reflected by the text. Her claim that "The sheer number of wild species named [in Isaiah] suggests that observation of the landscape outside the city formed a part of daily life,"¹³ is somewhat provocative, especially provided her own concession that scholarship can hardly determine what animals are being spoken of in much of Isaiah's prophetic menagerie (cf. Isaiah 34). Marlow seems to believe that the prophet's proximity to the natural world necessitates a benevolent view toward nature. She writes: "a part of Israelite community life is involved with, and dependent on the wild."¹⁴ However, the people's dependence on the wild tends to support a utilitarian view of nature and does not necessitate a thoroughgoing positive perception of the natural world by the ancient Israelites.¹⁵ Frequently in Isaiah, "wilderness" or that which is

12. *Ibid.*, 263.

13. *Ibid.*, 273.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel*, 10.

“wild” is depicted as a means of judgment upon the people. In Isa 34:13 thorns and briars overtake buildings as a sign of judgment, and in Isa 35:9, the lack of lions and other beasts is a sign of restored creation. Other passages in Isaiah 1–39 describe the wilderness as negative using terms such as “a terrible land” (Isa 21:1) and “deserted and forsaken” (Isa 27:10). A positive or neutral understanding of the wild in Isaiah 1–39 is only derived from reading against the plain meaning of the literature.

Along similar lines, Marlow’s exegesis of Isa 1:2–3 appears to reflect a vested interest in presenting the natural world as a highly valued “moral example” to humanity. Her interpretation of the text rejects the idea that the passage reflects a comparison between the intellect and rationality of animals over against that of human beings, even though the emphasis of the text is “knowledge” (יָדָה, *yada*), a word that has much more to do with understanding than moral uprightness. The passage seems to present an argument built upon the different mental capabilities of beasts of burden and human beings, and the case can be made that Isaiah is using a technique of argumentation that moves from “light to heavy,” a strategy known in later Judaism as *qal vahomer*. The prophet begins with what is “light”—the manifested “knowledge” of non-rational animals in getting food from their owner—and then compares it to what is “heavy”—people who are far superior in intellect but lack knowledge of and provision from the Lord. It is also important to note that the animals, both known for stubbornness and difficulty in handling, are described in parallel with Israel’s rebelliousness as a son. Therefore, it is possible that the text could point to both the ignorance and obstinacy of the animals, which, Isaiah asserts, Israel managed to surpass. Brevard Childs highlights the wisdom-like nature of these opening verses: “The accusation is made . . . in a parabolic form of wisdom. Israel has less understanding of its Lord than even the most stupid of domesticated animals.”¹⁶ The proposed alternative of interpreting Isa 1:3 as *qal vahomer* fits well in a parabolic context. Consequently, the weakness of Marlow’s exegesis is that Isaiah’s argument follows a progression

16. Childs, *Isaiah*, 17. See also Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 15.

and only works if there is an assumed qualitative difference between the two subjects being compared.

Next, Marlow derives most of her support for her arguments from Isaiah's agrarian context rather than explicit utterances recorded in the Bible, and at this point the question must be asked, is Marlow arguing for agrarianism over against urban culture? Is one more ethically right than the other? This factor of Marlow's research greatly reduces the effectiveness of her exegesis in defending her position, and demonstrates why her helpful treatment of the text offers little direction to her conclusions. If Isaiah's use of nature language and imagery simply flows from his agrarian context and immersion in the natural world, why should we conclude that such language holds any special meaning for the prophet? What other perception of the world did he have to draw upon in communicating to his audience? Marlow does not speak directly to the challenges of ethically and hermeneutically moving from an agrarian society to an urban one in her reading of Isaiah. When she does offer a brief comment, it is to state that her conclusions regarding ancient perceptions toward the natural world run counter to those found in scholarly literature on agrarianism in ancient Israel.¹⁷ Provided that her presentation of the subject disagrees with modern scholarship, Marlow's argument would have been greatly strengthened by interacting with studies of extra-biblical materials that argue for a utilitarian and agrarian worldview in the ancient world. Along similar lines, a noteworthy absence is found in Marlow's failure to mention Ellen Davis's *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, a monograph directly relating to an agrarian reading of Isaiah.

One final criticism can be brought against Marlow on account of her methodology. While she appropriately acknowledges the significance of the biblical data in articulating a contemporary Christian ethic on environmental issues, she appears to have arrived at her conclusions before examining the biblical text. In an earlier chapter she states that she will approach the text by an ecological hermeneutic that presupposes interconnectedness between God, humanity, and the natural world. She then con-

17. See Marlow, *Biblical Prophets*, 265.

cludes that her exegesis has proved that such close relationships exist. Could it be that what she found in biblical data was her own reflection? Given the fact that her survey of the biblical text does not cohere with, nor strongly support, her conclusions, the reader is left wondering which came first, the conclusions or the study?

The question remains whether or not Marlow's work will be accepted by the Christian audience to whom she is seeking to appeal. Her serious treatment of the biblical text will certainly attract the interest of many evangelical Christians who hold the Bible in high regard.

However, provided the aforementioned weaknesses, it would be a surprise if Marlow's research catapults the discussion to new heights. More radical environmentalists will likely take issue with Marlow's reluctant concession that the biblical data portray a worldview that looks like anthropocentrism, the environmental equivalent of sexism and racism, while lesser extremists will perhaps dislike her demonization of utilitarianism. If the previous evaluation of Marlow's study on nature language and imagery in Isaiah is correct, the following applications require further consideration: (1) Isaiah 1–39 reflects nature language and imagery as a consequence of the prophet living and ministering in an agrarian context, (2) since nature language and imagery is largely contextual, its presence reveals relatively little about the prophet's perceived view of humanity's relationship with the natural world (3) Isaiah's perception of non-human creation is anthropocentric and theocentric, with the natural world functioning as a reflection of man's sin and/or God's glory, (4) contemporary environmental ethicists cannot appeal to Isaiah 1–39 to defend the view that humanity and non-human creation hold equal inherent value, (5) since utilitarianism does not equal exploitation, Christians can affirm a biblical utilitarian anthropocentric view in relating to the natural world that proactively rejects exploitation and long-term damage, and (6) given the anthropocentric cause-and-effect relationship observed in the text, responsibility is to be placed upon humanity for the environmental status of the natural world, regardless of whether one is speaking about eating forbidden fruit or driving SUVs.

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